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SERIAL KILLERS IN POPULAR MEDIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SENSATIONALISM AND  
SUPPORT FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

BY

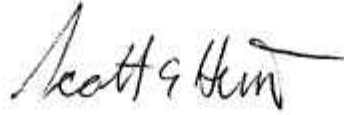
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SERIAL KILLERS IN POPULAR MEDIA: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SENSATIONALISM AND  
SUPPORT FOR CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

BY

APRIL PACE

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

2019

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## ABSTRACT

Serial murder has been a popular media phenomenon across the United States since the 1980s, and media representations of serial killers may significantly influence public opinion as well as impact capital punishment policies. This content analysis examined the portrayal of one dozen different serial killers using 120 online media reports which included articles published between the 1970s to present day. Results of the analysis showed serial killers were often sensationalized and portrayed in biased ways by popular media, with little attention afforded to academic theories. Support for capital punishment was also prevalent. These findings have implications for policy makers seeking to abolish capital punishment as well as law enforcement who may overlook killers that do not fit popular media stereotypes.

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## I. Introduction

Names like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and John Wayne Gacy are infamous across America due to the egregious crimes perpetrated by each man throughout recent decades and the extensive media coverage each individual received. Long after their deaths, these men, and others like them, continue to fascinate criminal justice scholars, practitioners, and laypersons alike. Today, they each represent major aspects of the stereotypical “serial killer” profile that dominates American media: an intelligent, methodical white man in or near his 30s who experienced a difficult childhood that now sexually assaults and violently murders strangers he either abducted or lured away with superficial charm. This description, however, is far from a definitive representation of documented serial murderers as many kill for power and control with no sexual motive while some are “commanded” by a deity or vision during a psychotic episode to kill. Others may kill with a partner rather than alone, claim the lives of people they personally know or kill for monetary gain, as is common with female serial killers, although they are a rare occurrence within an already limited criminological phenomenon (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

The term “serial murder” was first popularized by the media in the 1980s to differentiate the act from other types of multiple homicide including: mass murder and spree killing. By the mid-80s, talk of a serial murder problem was commonplace, although the actual threat of victimization remained rare. True infrequency, however, did not stop media outlets from making highly inflated claims, such as roughly 5,000 individuals falling victim to serial murderers each year in America (Jenkins, 1994).

Sensationalism and tabloid marketing became an increasingly popular tactic during the 1980s, and the decade's journalists exploited the "newly discovered" crime of serial murder for their own gains. While the phenomenon of serial murder had existed in documented human history for centuries, it garnered little public or academic attention until the 1980s due to significant increases in the discovery of serial murder victims and apprehension of serial killers. Of 337 profiled cases of serial murder in the United States from 1800 to 1995, 302 of the cases occurred after 1980 (Castle & Hensley, 2002).

While some of the apparent increase in serial murder owes itself to advancements in law enforcement technology that allow for easier linkage of random murder victims to serial patterns, this is far from the only reason for the drastic rise in rates of confirmed serial murders over recent decades in the United States. Media coverage regarding serial murder is also theorized as a possible cause for the phenomenon's increase, as potential killers are easily exposed to information that could teach them necessary techniques to carry out their own fantasies or simply inspire them to finally act on an impulse they have resisted for years. Further, shifts in American culture, its increased focus on militarization, the constant glorification of violence, and the use of serious forms of conditioning through dehumanization of the "enemy" in military training which makes killing easier all serve as catalysts for the phenomenon of serial murder (Castle & Hensley, 2002).

Although rates of serial murder have increased, the crime itself remains extremely rare and therefore difficult to investigate for both law enforcement officials

and academics. This scarcity has led to difficulty in coming to consensus on a single definition of what truly defines a “serial killer.” Scholars have found themselves unable to agree upon which categories should even be considered relevant when profiling a possible serial killer, such as: whether the killer knew their victims, whether the crime was sexually motivated, if the killing was committed in a violent and methodical way, the victim-threshold for moving from killer to serial killer, or if there should even be a victim-threshold at all. This disagreement has led many academics to avoid defining the term altogether in their works and take a “you know it when you see it” approach or craft definitions to suit their own research needs. Other researchers use definitions set forth by law enforcement agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI has settled on a specific legal definition of serial murder: “a series of two or more murders, committed as separate events, usually, but not always, by one offender acting alone;” however, this definition is widely disputed by scholars due to its threshold of only two victims for one to be eligible for the label of “serial killer.” Prior to 2005, the FBI definition of serial murder required at least three victims for a murderer to be labeled a serial killer. This change was made during an invitation-only symposium strictly for law enforcement reasons to create flexibility with allocating resources for investigations. Consensus on a separate academic definition is necessary to allow for the direct comparison of results between studies (Fridel & Fox, 2017).

Serial murder and sensationalist journalism were not the only criminological phenomenon on the rise throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as support for capital punishment had been steadily increasing throughout the United States since its

reinstatement in 1976, and research from 1994 shows that 80 percent of Americans supported the death penalty that year. It was during this same year that the federal government expanded its capital punishment statute, which made 60 offenses eligible for the death penalty, instead of the one capital offense of the previous law (Dieter, 2007). Executions peaked in 1999, with 98 Americans put to death that year, but rates began to slowly decline with the turn of the millennium. In recent years, only around half the American public has indicted support for capital punishment (Oliphant, 2018). Various factors have served to decrease public support for the death penalty, the most powerful being the possible execution of innocents, a travesty at least 87 percent of Americans believe to have occurred; however, indirect factors such as shifts in media coverage also influence public opinion. As the serial murder craze of the 1980s and 90s faded, so too did the public's support for capital punishment (Dieter, 2007).

Although mainstream news coverage of the “serial murder epidemic” greatly declined following its climax in the 1980s, American serial killers have remained prolific. Modern research (Aamodt, 2016; Walters, Drislane, Patrick, & Hickey, 2015) on rates of serial murder finds that roughly two to three percent of homicides in any given year are known serial offenses, which equates to somewhere between 300 and 450 victims of serial killers each year, a far cry from the 5,000 reported by sensationalist media outlets during the 80s. The FBI's 2012 Unified Crime Report indicated that more than 150 serial killers were identified or apprehended between the years of 2000 and 2011, exceeding numbers reported for the previous 25 years; however, revisions made to the FBI's definition of serial murder in the later part of the

decade lowered the victim-threshold from three to two; this must be taken into account when examining these increases (Walters et al., 2015).

Despite its extreme rarity, serial murder remains an important social concern with a necessity for future study, as current research is limited and misconceptions about the phenomenon remain widespread. As of 2016, the Radford University serial killer database reported a total of 117 American serial killers who committed their first murder between the years of 2010 and 2015; further, between the years of 2000 and 2009, 371 American serial killers committed their first murder, according to the database. The most recent year in the report, 2015, is stated to have had 15 separate serial killers actively operating within the United States when limiting the victim threshold to three; at a threshold of two, the number of active killers increases to 30. These numbers, while down from the reported high of 128 killers at large in 1987, are still two to three times higher than each year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century prior to the 1960s (Aamodt, 2016).

Media sensationalism of serial killers also warrants investigation, as some scholars argue killers have become glamorized by the media into “sexualized celebrities,” especially in the case of fictional killers such as Hannibal Lecter and Dexter (Spychaj, 2017). Further, Haggerty (2009) claims a symbiotic relationship exists between the mass media and serial murderers, as the media elevates killers to celebrity status by playing on themes of dangerous strangers attacking innocent victims in hopes of increasing the media’s economic gain. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate the portrayal of serial killers by the mass media across recent

decades, how these depictions compare and contrast with current academic explanations of serial murder, and how media sensationalism may influence public opinion of killers as well as support for capital punishment.

## II. Literature Review

This chapter is divided into three sections: theories of causation, media sensationalism, and research questions. The theories of causation section discusses three foundational theories of crime, biological, psychological, sociological, and their application to serial murder based on preexisting literature. The media sensationalism section addresses the existence of media bias in the United States and its impact on public opinion regarding serial killers, including how the creation of fear by the media allows for the continued public support of capital punishment in the United States. Finally, the research questions include five questions that this analysis intends to address with its findings.

### Theories of Causation

Criminological theories used for explaining the possible causes of serial murder stem from three main frameworks: the biological, psychological, and sociological, each of which focuses on different internal and/or environmental factors. While it is impossible to ever completely know why serial murder occurs, as the mind of each killer is unique, academic theorists are dedicated to describing as many aspects of the social problem as possible. It is these academic theories that often serve as the basis for serial murder investigations and killer profiling techniques depicted in countless modern television crime dramas and movies (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

Biological theories of crime focus on internal aspects of the individual that are mostly beyond one's control, such as hormonal imbalances, brain wave activity, or other physical abnormalities. The earliest form of biological theory came in the form of



Cesare Lombroso's atavism, in which he claimed that criminals tended to have abnormally shaped skulls similar to that of lesser-evolved early humans, which could be observed through many physical traits such as flattened noses or protruding lips. Lombroso's theory was later expanded by Sheldon, Stevens, and Tucker (1940) with the idea of somatypes: body types linked to criminal behavior. Today, however, neither of these ideas find much support in the scientific community. Instead, biological explanations of serial murder tend to focus on the brain wave abnormalities often present in killers prior to age 40 or the occurrence of childhood head trauma that may have led to hormonal imbalances (Minaker, n.d.).

Psychological and sociological theories of crime offer a much deeper analysis of serial murder than their biological counterparts. Common psychological theories of explanation cover a range of topics, such as: general "psychopathic" personality traits like lack of emotional attachment, psychotic visions and breaks from reality, and deep-seated humiliation or hatred that leads to displaced acts of aggression on a quest for vengeance. Many of these theories are built upon the foundation of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which is concerned with discovering the subconscious drives that motivate a person to behave in certain ways, especially those which deviate from social norms. In contrast, sociological theories of crime focus on the structure of society, social processes, and the influence of external stimuli on an individual's behavior. In the explanation of serial murder, these theories tend to focus on the killer's exposure to violence during childhood or at other impressionable points of life, building upon Albert Bandura's social learning theory that asserts individuals learn

violence by first witnessing the violent behaviors of others and then seeing the “reward” that follows.

The foundational theories of serial murder also serve as a framework for the archetypes set forth by Holmes and Holmes (2009) in their book *Serial Murder*. These types include the visionary killer, the mission killer, the hedonistic killer, and the power/control killer, each of which has specific motivations for killing-- although one killer may belong to multiple categories. Visionary killers are known to have psychotic breaks with reality and may be driven to kill by violent hallucinations, such as murderous talking heads. Mission killers believe themselves to be on a quest to rid the world of a certain “undesirable” population, often times prostitutes, but they are not driven by psychosis like the visionary killer. Hedonistic killers, as the name implies, kill simply for the enjoyment of murder. This type includes the subtypes of thrill and lust killers, only the latter of which is sexually motivated. Finally, power/control killers desire to feel in full control of their victims and will spend much time torturing and dehumanizing them, often returning to the crime scene many times to further desecrate the bodies as they decompose. Additionally, categories may overlap, such as a power/control killer who also obtains a hedonistic thrill from his actions.

**Biological Causes.** Philosophers have speculated that criminal traits are present in the genes of certain individuals since the inception of criminological reasoning. Physiognomy, the study of one’s facial features, was popular with the ancient Greeks. In the 1760s, Johan Caspar Lavater claimed to have discovered a relationship between facial structure and behavior, and in 1810, Franz Joseph Gall published his six-volume

thesis on phrenology. Gall's theory asserted crime, like all behavior, was governed by certain areas of the brain. Crime, therefore, could be predicted by measuring the bumps on an individual's skull. The lack of scientific credibility in early attempts at biological explanations of crime, along with their links to eugenics, led to an aversion to the approach throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lanier, Henry, & Anastasia, 2014).

One striking example of an important historical but ultimately unscientific theory of crime lay in the work of Cesare Lombroso, an Italian criminal anthropologist and professor who opposed the overemphasis placed on free will by classicists such as Beccaria (1986). Known as the Italian School, Lombroso and his two students, Ferri and Garofalo, asserted human behavior was largely controlled by outside forces beyond one's own control, and that criminal traits were inherent within the genes of certain individuals. In his 1876 book *The Criminal Man*, Lombroso discussed his theory of atavism, which was founded in Charles Darwin's idea that the "worst dispositions" in mankind represented "reversions to a savage state." Atavism may be defined as the reappearance of a trait after an absence across several generations, and according to Lombroso, criminals were created by the manifestation of savage, atavistic traits. Lombroso also believed these individuals could be easily identified by physical abnormalities, such as asymmetrical faces, large jaws, extra fingers/toes/nipples, and more (Lombroso, Gibson & Rafter, 2006).

Lombroso's theory included 18 "stigmata" in total, with the presence of five indicating atavism which could explain "the irresistible craving for evil for its own sake,

the desire not only to extinguish life in the victim, but to mutilate the corpse, tear its flesh and drink its blood,” according the Lombroso himself. Not all criminals, however, fit into the atavistic category, and Lombroso had recognized four distinct criminal types by his fifth edition, only around one-third of which consisted of dangerous atavists. Eventually, Lombroso admitted social and environmental factors influence crime along with biological drives, and by the end of his life, he had become an environmental theorist who still asserted there were innate differences between criminals and “ordinary” people (Lanier et al., 2014).

While early ideas linking criminality to inherent traits were deeply flawed, the aid of science and technology has developed past speculations into the foundation for modern biological theories of crime. By the early 2000s, significant advancements in technology and sophisticated diagnostic procedures had replaced the pseudo-scientific biological theories of the past, and researchers had discovered that certain brain injuries, cerebrospinal disorders, and even viral infections could cause severe personality changes and violent outbursts. Had this been known to the medical and scientific community before 1966, perhaps the mass murders committed by Charles J. Whitman could have been prevented. Whitman was a 25-year-old man who murdered his wife and mother before climbing a tower at the University of Texas at Austin and gunning down dozens of victims. He was shot and killed by police, but a note he left next to his wife’s body revealed he had been suffering terrible headaches and violent outbursts, which he had complained of to doctors in the months before the murders. An autopsy later revealed a walnut-sized malignant tumor on Whitman’s

hypothalamus, a growth which is known to cause irrational outbursts of violent behavior (Lanier et al., 2014).

Physical abnormalities or injuries to the brain are not the only known biological cause of violent behavior. As scientific advancement led to the discovery of neurotransmitters, chemicals that relay messages between neurons in the brain, new ideas about the association between brain chemistry and crime arose. One of these ideas focuses on the hormone cortisol, which is released by the adrenal gland in response to physical or psychological stress and activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis of the brain. Exposure to violence can also result in hyper-activation or hypo-activation of this area, and dysregulation of the HPA axis is associated with both poor physical and mental health. In a healthy individual, the HPA axis is activated by cortisol in response to “fight-or-flight” situations and returns to normal functioning once the stressful situation has passed (Aiyer, Heinze, Miller, Stoddard, & Zimmerman, 2014).

Extreme levels of stress in childhood and adolescence may impair various areas of the brain, such as the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala, as these areas are neglected while the HPA axis remains active. Prolonged exposure to stress may also heighten one’s sensitivity to future threats, leaving the individual more susceptible to feelings of fear and anxiety; however, constant stress may also work to decrease one’s subsequent sensitivity to stress, creating individuals who are less likely to flee from threats or empathize with others, traits which are often associated with aggressive, violent criminals. Furthermore, excessive stress has been found to impair

self-control due to its effects on the pre-frontal cortex, and impulsivity is often related to further antisocial behavior (Rocque, Posick, & Felix, 2015).

The psychopathic personality that is characteristic of many serial murderers and often associated with psychological research has also been studied by other medical professionals. In the 1980s, a group of researchers discovered EEG abnormalities often present in psychopaths tend to disappear once individuals reach age 40. They speculated this may be due to the brains of psychopaths finally maturing into healthy adult brains, leading to an end to their previous childish, hedonistic behavior. According to the researchers, killers may become better able to handle emotional distress and respond in socially acceptable ways once their brains have reached a normal level of maturity. Other types of physiological disturbances, such as severe head trauma during birth, childhood, or adolescence, have also been investigated. While early-life head trauma has been discovered as a shared trait among many serial killers, further claims using this evidence have failed to produce any credible scientific results (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

Despite ground-breaking advancements in scientific and medical technology, there is still no evidence that biological factors play the sole or even most important role in the perpetration of serial murder. The small, impossible to control sample of killers who have been caught, convicted, and tested cannot be considered representative of the entire population nor reliable. Further research that focuses on specific brain areas and their development throughout life, including physical and

chemical disturbances, is necessary to determine whether certain biological factors are directly linked to fatal violence (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

**Sociological Causes.** While biological theories still play an important role in criminology today, most researchers no longer argue that these factors alone lead directly to crime. Rather, some influence beyond one's hardwired genetics and neural chemistry must act upon the individual as well. For sociological explanations of crime, this additional influence comes from one's unique external environment. These theories tend to focus on either the social structure or social process within a given culture. Social structure theories assume that certain groups are more prone to delinquency due to their lowered social status, such as the poor committing property crimes and robbery. Social process theories, in contrast, argue that crime is a product of socialization and the violence or abuse one may experience throughout life (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

In specific, social learning theory focuses on the social process and offers an explanation for criminal acts that combines both psychological and sociological influences. It is built upon the domain assumptions that individuals have some extent of control over their behaviors and are not simply passive actors at the mercy of their biological traits, as other psychological theories and many biological theories have asserted. The theory originated in the work of Gabriel Tarde and was later expanded upon by Albert Bandura with his conception of role-modeling. Its basic tenants hold that individuals are influenced by their external environment to act in certain ways based upon their own agency. Individuals come to these decisions by evaluating the

possible consequences of their actions based upon events they have observed in the past. Positive consequences will reinforce a behavior and make it more likely to be repeated in the future while negative consequences will decrease the likelihood of a behavior reoccurring. Consequences are specifically learned through role-modeling, in which an individual witnesses a behavior being carried out by another person or group they identify with and then later witnesses the results of said behavior (Lanier et al., 2014).

While Bandura's social learning theory offers an explanation of the possible causes of general behavior, which can include deviant acts, his later established process of moral disengagement melds with social learning theory to offer an explanation of the socially constructed mental processes involved with the perpetration of crime. According to Bandura, people adopt certain moral guidelines based upon their early socialization, and these standards serve to influence one's moral conduct throughout life; however, people are able to disengage from their morality through multiple processes: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, and dehumanization. Many of these disengagement tactics are actively employed by governments to condition soldiers during wartime and increase rates of firing to kill or keep citizens complacent with the mistreatment of minority groups, as in Nazi Germany (Bandura, 1999).

Ron Akers later expanded Bandura's original theory of social learning by combining it with Edwin Sutherland's theory of differential association. Akers asserts



that crime is learned through social interaction and the creation of definitions that are favorable to crime. As people vary in the different associations they have with others, with some individuals inevitably interacting more with deviant peers than others, they develop varied definitions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Burgess & Akers, 1966). According to Akers, one's own attitude toward crime develops through these associations and influences whether crime is seen as desirable, permissible, or undesirable in certain situations (Castle & Hensley, 2002).

Akers focused more on the importance of Bandura's modeling than Sutherland in his original theory of differential association. His concept of differential reinforcement is conceptualized as a balance of the rewards and punishments, whether real or anticipated, that are consequences of a certain behavior, and it contends that social reinforcers are the most important type of reward or punishment (Pratt et al., 2010, p. 768). As such, individuals who are embedded in deviant social environments have their criminal actions reinforced by watching others carry out rewarding crimes and learning to anticipate similar consequences.

Since its formation, dozens of studies have been conducted over various aspects of social learning theory in order to test its scientific validity. Typically, studies investigate one or more of the four specific constructs within Akers' theory: differential association, definitions, imitation, and differential reinforcement. Narrative reviews have returned mostly positive conclusions about social learning theory as a whole, although concern about the possible spurious relationship between crime and the theory's chosen variables remains. Many important criminologists have

commented on the status of social learning theory in recent decades. In 2001, Bob Agnew stated that the theory has much support and called the perspective a leading explanation of delinquency (Pratt et al., 2010).

Meta-analyses have offered further support for the validity of social learning theory. A recent analysis by Pratt et al. (2010) included data from 133 studies of social learning theory conducted between 1974 and 2003, with the intent of producing a more systematic sample of studies than has been used in previous meta-analyses. The researchers organized the analysis around the same four key constructs prior social learning analyses had employed in hopes of illustrating which portions of the theory are best supported by the literature and which areas are lacking in empirical support. Their analysis found effect sizes for differential association and definitions were comparable to effect sizes found in Pratt and Cullen's (2000) meta-analysis on self-control theory and larger than the effect sizes found in Pratt, Cullen, Blevins, Daigle, and Madensen (2006) meta-analysis of deterrence theory. Further, their results suggested that the variables set forth by social learning theory are strong predictors of criminal behavior due to the "general effects" that can be seen across variations in methodology.

In their book *Social Learning Theory and the Explanation of Crime*, Akers and Jensen (2011) assert that social learning theory may be the most compatible theory for explaining homicide levels on a global scale. According to the researchers, previous research by Gartner (1990) found that five specific factors play a significant role in global variation of homicide rates: cultural heterogeneity, exposure to violence,

unstable family relationships, lack of state support of social welfare, and availability of unguarded targets, each of which can be directly linked to concepts within social learning theory. Further, when applied on a macro-level, social learning theory has fared the best when investigating crime through self-report data, while strain theory has fared the worst.

While a solid theory that has remained important in criminological discussion, social learning theory is not without its limitations. One major issue with the theory is its lack of parsimony as the inclusion of many constructs makes the theory difficult to empirically evaluate. Further issues arise with the theory's lack of ability to readily explain why some individuals who are socialized in highly criminogenic environments do not develop deviant patterns of behavior while others socialized in less criminogenic environments do turn to crime. Social learning also lacks any biological consideration, which is useful when examining differences across genders, races, and ages, even when it is not the sole focus (Lanier et al., 2014). Beyond this, some critics, such as Tittle and Paternoster, argue that social learning theory fails to incorporate important variables such as actual opportunities for crime (Jensen, 2017).

According to Akers' theory, the behavioral consequences of social learning may stem from various influential groups or individuals within a person's life: family, friends, co-workers, gangs, religious groups, military and police regimes, and many more. While any of these groups could possibly serve as an application of social learning theory to serial murder, recent trends in the American military and police offer an interesting explanation for the continued stability of serial murder rates rather

than a return to the lower levels prior to the 1960s. Dave Grossman, a military expert on the psychology of killing and creator of the term “killology,” explains that the military today employs various training methods designed to increase the “fire to kill” rates of soldiers, including brutalization, conditioning, and role-modeling. Research shows that while firing rates only hovered between 15 percent and 20 percent during World War II, they had risen to 55 percent by the Korean War and an astounding 90 percent during Vietnam (Castle & Hensley, 2002).

When individuals enter the military, that group often becomes their main source of reinforcement and punishment, and military values such as an embrace of violence and aggression or dehumanization of outsiders and the enemy often become core beliefs of each individual soldier. Servicemen learn not only to accept death and the act of killing, but also brutal killing techniques and methods to neutralize remorse. Compartmentalization and dehumanization are specifically employed to make enemy groups appear subhuman and allow soldiers to brutally execute them while continuing to live a “normal” life when off the battlefield, unimpeded by thoughts of what they have done. These same tactics are often used by serial killers as dehumanization of their victims makes raping, torturing, dismembering, and other acts typically associated with heinous serial murders much easier to carry out. As stated by a convicted serial killer in Holmes & Holmes’ (2009) book *Serial Murder*:

Indeed, there was a time when my conscience hardly ever considered any of my victims to be human beings. For, even when I was actually committing crimes against young women, I never saw them as being anything more than

little, inanimate blocks of wood that really counted for nothing. They simply were not people to me; therefore, they warranted not a single ounce of human consideration. I could hold them against their will. I could brutalize them. I could rape them. I could even murder them. And, because their screams and tears seldom struck me as being any more human than the splinters that naturally arise when a block of wood is chopped down to size, I would feel no shame or any sense of guilt over forcing them to undergo the most sadistic extremes of ritualized violence. (p. 40)

Further, compartmentalization allows serial killers to exist in society and have a typical life far removed from their deviant hobby. Some serial murderers even maintain healthy intimate relationships and families with people they do not intend to kill, as they are so skilled in separating the two disparate areas of their lives (Castle & Hensley, 2002).

**Psychological Causes.** The idea of subconscious drives or impulses that largely determine human behavior was first popularized by Sigmund Freud with his theory of psychoanalysis in the early 1900s. According to Freud, the personality consists of three elements: the id, ego, and superego. Of these, the id is believed to control one's instinctive drives, such as hunger and libido, and it acts impulsively to obtain that which will bring it the most pleasure. The superego, in contrast, is concerned with morality and works to act in socially acceptable ways. The ego works as a balance between the id and superego to ensure instinct and morality both manifest as needed in order to create a socially healthy individual (Freud, 1910).

Because the ego acts to protect the individual and keep them functional in the social world, it may employ certain defense mechanisms to keep unwanted thoughts at bay, such as repression, denial, or displacement. This is a common occurrence for individuals who experience childhood trauma, which includes many serial killers. These coping mechanisms, however, may result in more harm later on, as it becomes impossible for the ego to continue hiding the past trauma and negative feelings associated with it. Freud himself believed that damage to the superego could result in antisocial behavior, while other researchers have hypothesized it is a specific conflict between the id and superego that eventually results in violent behavior. To illustrate this point, Ronald Holmes recalled an interview with a convicted serialist in which the guilty man vividly recounted a memory of being punished for eating a fruit he did not take as a child. This one event, according to the killer, had such a profound impact on his psyche, that perhaps he would not have become a killer had it never happened (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

The idea of past frustrations manifesting into future aggression was first published by Yale researchers in their 1939 book *Frustration and Aggression* (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears). According to the researchers, aggression is always a consequence of frustration, and all frustrations will lead to some form of aggression. Specific forms of aggression will be reinforced when they lower the aversive frustration. Frustration, in this sense, is defined as “an interference with the occurrence of an instigated goal-response at its proper time in the behavior sequence,” while aggression is considered “any sequence of behavior, the goal-

response to which is the injury of the person toward whom it is directed (p. 7).” Overt attempts at injuring a target do not occur in response to every frustration, however, as individuals are aware of the possible punishments associated with such behavior, and a frustrated person may restrain themselves from lashing out if they fear bringing harm to themselves or their loved ones (Berkowitz, 1989).

Dollard et al. (1939) further discuss the specific targets of aggression, asserting that acts of aggression will be carried out against the presumed source of a frustration unless the threat of punishment displaces the aggression to a secondary target. The displacement of aggression onto innocent, uninvolved targets is a common trait of many serial killers, as men like Ted Bundy seek out and kill women that resemble their ex-lovers or hateful mothers. One striking example of displaced aggression leading to serial murder is the case of Edmund Kemper, the co-ed killer. Kemper killed 10 people over the course of a decade, three of which included his paternal grandparents and mother. Excluding these victims and a friend of his mother, the other six people Kemper killed were all young college women and one high school girl. These slayings spanned only 11 months before culminating in the murder of Kemper’s mother and friend before he turned himself into police. Kemper has since stated that he deeply hated his mother due to the psychological abuse she subjected him to as a child, and he chose to kill her in order to make the killings of the other women stop, once he finally realized it was his mother he was trying to kill all along (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

Kemper's murder of his own mother and subsequent surrender to authorities illustrates a particular aspect of frustration as it relates to serial murder. Serial killers who are fueled by past, subconscious frustrations rely heavily on the role of fantasy. They play out murders time and again in their minds, imagining specific rituals and victims, constructing a rationale that creates a feeling of satisfaction as the killer's frustrations are momentarily relieved. Each murder, however, will never provide the permanent relief from frustration the killer seeks, and the search for the "perfect victim" will continue (Holmes & Holmes, 2009). Kemper provides evidence in support of this theory, as he was able to achieve his ultimate fantasy and find permanent relief from frustration by killing the person he believed to be its source, his mother. Since his imprisonment in 1973, he has waived many of his possible parole hearings and has stated he is happy in prison, further illustrating his lack of desire to continue killing.

The idea of a psychopathic personality consisting of a specific set of traits is one of the most popular psychological theories used for explaining serial murder. Generally, the psychopath is viewed as an intelligent, charming individual, but one who lacks any real sense of empathy or sincerity and is aggressive, impulsive, hedonistic, and ultimately dangerous. The psychopath enjoys his antisocial behavior and has no desire to abide by the rules of society and integrate into normal life. He will continue to offend as long as his crimes are pleasurable and until age or incarceration stops him (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

Theories of human personality have identified various clusters of traits that often appear together within one person, known as "super-traits." There is still debate,



however, over the exact number of super-traits that make up the human personality. Three of the broadest categorizations of super-traits include constraint, positive emotionality, and negative emotionality. Individuals high on constraint tend to endorse conventional social values and avoid dangerous thrill seeking. Negative emotionality involves aggression, alienation, and reactions to stress, while positive emotionality is concerned with achievement, social closeness and potency, and personal wellbeing. Caspi et al. (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2017) explain that individuals with high levels of negative emotionality may incorrectly perceive interpersonal events as threatening and react accordingly. When paired with low levels of constraint, negative emotions quickly manifest into aggressive action, creating volatile and antisocial individuals. While the researchers' interest was specifically in understanding juvenile delinquency, the described traits also parallel the traditional profile of a psychopath.

More recent research focusing on the psychopathic personality has uncovered the existence of a "divided self" in some serial killers. Al Carlisle, a former prison psychologist in Utah, served as a therapist for many convicted killers, including Bundy. According to Carlisle, some killers were able to protect themselves from personality disintegration and maintain a "good" or "light" social persona through various tactics of moral disengagement, most importantly the dehumanization and objectification of their victims. One imprisoned man described to Holmes that as he stalked his victims, they ceased to be women with friends, families, and partners who cared for them; rather, they became nothing more empty cans crumpled and discarded on the ground,

which he could easily abuse and destroy without any lasting effects on his conscience (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

While moral disengagement is a type of social learning theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura, morality itself exists within the psyche of an individual and develops throughout the course of one's life. The concept of moral development was originally defined by Jean Piaget and later expanded by Lawrence Kohlberg into six distinct stages. The stages are divided into three pairs, each of which represents a different overall level of moral reasoning. The first pair is known as the preconventional level, the stage children are expected to be at. Preconventional morality is hedonistic at its core. Children will avoid "being bad" because the consequences of punishment outweigh the benefits of their behavior, and they will treat others with fairness and reciprocity only so long as they believe they will receive the same treatment in return (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977).

The second pair of stages, known as the conventional level, involves conformity to the overall social order and expectations of one's family and peers, as well as loyalty to and justification of those values. At stage three, an individual abides by social norms due to a desire to present a "good" persona to others and initiate positive interactions. At stage four, however, individuals abide by social norms for the wellbeing of society, and violation of the law is considered morally wrong because it harms society as a whole. At this stage, moral reasoning is still dictated by an outside force, and according to Kohlberg, this is the stage most adults remain at throughout their lives (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977).

The final pair of stages is known as the postconventional or autonomous level, at which point the individual realizes one's own moral values may be separate from those defined by groups with social authority. People who have reached this stage will live by their own moral principles and disobey social norms and laws that go against their own beliefs. Democratic governments operate, in theory, at the fifth level of moral reasoning, allowing for the alteration of laws to establish fairness for as many people as possible. The sixth stage is more abstract than its predecessors, and Kohlberg found it difficult to identify individuals who operated strictly at this level. Known as the universal-ethical-principle-orientation, this stage involves acting in accordance with self-chosen principles based on the logic of universality, consistency, and comprehensiveness. Individuals at this stage of moral reasoning will act simply because it is the right thing to do, regardless of possible rewards, punishments, or expectations (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977).

Al Carlisle's concept of a divided self that is created to preserve the "good" side of a killer aligns with Kohlberg's third stage of moral development, in which individuals conform to social norms due to a desire to be perceived as a good person by others; however, through moral disengagement, serial killers are able to regress to the first stages of moral reasoning, in which physical consequences determine the goodness of an action, regardless of human meaning. As serial killers derive pleasure from torturing and murdering their victims, a positive consequence, their behavior will likely continue until it is no longer pleasurable, or until the killer is apprehended (Holmes & Holmes, 2009).

## Media Sensationalism

As stated by Haney (2009) in his discussion on media criminology, “the profitability of apparent realism makes it subject to manipulation (p. 693).” Whether they be little white lies told by a teenager to her parents about who all exactly is going to a party one night, or more sinister deceptions delivered by the smiling lips of a serial killer, humans bend the truth to skew reality in hopes of furthering their own goals across various types of interactions every day. The mainstream media is no exception to this rule, as facts are misrepresented or entirely made up on a regular basis in news reports and journal articles, often with the aim of furthering a specific agenda. One notable example lay in the past, now debunked claims of Ronald Reagan and much of the nation’s mainstream media that 1.5 million children were abducted in the United States each year. Many citizens fell prey to these drastically inflated claims, becoming obsessively fearful of the possibility of their children being taken by strangers. Eventually, however, LA journalists collected data directly from the federal government and discovered only around 100 children were abducted by strangers within any given year in the United States. Further investigation revealed the 1.5 million statistic included all teenage runaways as well as children involved in divorce disputes.

The phenomenon of serial murder has been increasingly sensationalized by the media since the FBI’s initial report that around 5,000 victims were claimed each year in the mid-1980s, and many convicted killers have become mythological figureheads in popular culture, garnering both fear and fanbases even after their deaths. Various

parties with their own agendas have presented this “new” type of violent criminal as an imminent threat to public safety and worthy of social action (Hodgkinson, Prins, & Stuart-Bennett, 2017). Throughout the 1980s, as members of the Reagan Administration worked to end the corruption they believed prior decades of liberalism had brought upon the United States, various aspects of sexuality, abortion, drug use, consumption of pornography, and other “deviant” behaviors were reframed as inherently evil and “sinful.” Serial killers represented a perfect combination of many of these traits, and the moral crusade of the Reagan Administration paired with the FBI’s initial inflated claims on the annual rates of serial murder served to redefine violent criminals as autonomous, morally corrupt individuals. Today, serial killers have been adopted by the mainstream media as a common illustration of the most reprehensible crimes imaginable, perpetrated by inhuman predators (Spychaj, 2017).

Lin and Phillips (2012) examined media coverage of capital murder trials in Houston, Texas between 1992 and 1999 to discover which characteristics of crimes, offenders, and victims predicted both incremental and high profile coverage. Their results found that incremental coverage, which occurs over time and does not make the front page, increases as sexual degradation increases, number of defendants increases, or if a death penalty is imposed. Victim characteristics also had a significant impact, with the expected article count for white female victims 80 percent higher than it was for black males. However, personal characteristics of the offender had little impact on incremental coverage. In contrast, high-profile (front page) coverage depended almost entirely on the characteristics of both victims and defendants, with

racial minority offenders and white female victims receiving the most coverage. Overall, incremental coverage is about what happened and to whom, while high profile coverage is about victims and offenders and less about the actual event.

Research by Lin and Phillips (2012) further examined the highest of high-profile cases, called “media frenzies” by the authors, which receive extraordinary amounts of media coverage. The researchers focused on 89 crimes that resulted in a death sentence and found that just two crimes accounted for 40 percent of all front page coverage. 30 front page articles existed for one crime alone, a serial killer case, which was 7.8 standard deviations above the mean. The second crime was a gang rape and murder involving two white teenage girls that generated 14 front page articles, less than half the amount generated by the serial killer case.

Hodgkinson, Prins, and Stuart-Bennett (2017) discuss the selective focus of the media in their quest to create moral panic surrounding serial murder. Facts are distorted and different aspects of each case are problematized as the media attempts to paint a picture of the stereotypical American serial killer. Often, cases that do not fit the traditional killer profile are downplayed and the killers forgotten, along with their victims. Branson (2013) discusses this media bias in relation to the race of serial killers, asserting that, although blacks account for roughly 40 percent of known serial killers, they rarely receive extensive media coverage as their cases do not reinforce popular stereotypes. This idea is supported by claims of Hodgkinson et al. that many of the dominant “truths” about serial killers are nothing more than distorted inconsistencies,

used to convince the public an offender poses significant risk and is far outside the bounds of normalcy (2017).

Smiley (2019) further emphasizes the role popular media plays in sustaining certain beliefs about serial killers. With Netflix's January 2019 release of "Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes" and the movie "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile" starring Zac Efron set to release in Fall 2019, it is easy to see how Bundy has remained infamous across the United States three decades after his execution; however, while Bundy was an educated, charming, and attractive man, it is more than just these qualities that have sustained his place as an iconic serial killer. Bundy's choice to target white females who were not from vulnerable communities, such as sex workers, only made him more terrifying to the general public of white, "upstanding" citizens, who themselves now felt vulnerable as well. Although Bundy is not a portrait of a typical serial killer, nor are his victims representative of those most often targeted by serial killers, he rose to notoriety because his story generated massive sales for the media, a trend which continues to this day.

Additional research by Phillips, Haas, and Coverdill (2012) examined the impact of victim gender and race on capital murder trials as well as the influence of sexual degradation and media coverage using a population of 504 defendants indicted for murder in Harris County, Texas between 1992 and 1999. The researchers found media coverage was positively correlated with the DA's likelihood to seek death, and that the expected number of newspaper articles prior to indictment was 46 percent higher in cases involving a white female victim; however, even when controlling for media

coverage, the DA were still 3.69 times more likely to seek death in cases with a white female victim but only around 1.6 times more likely to seek death for Hispanic and black female victims in comparison to male victims. Sexual degradation, in contrast, was only likely to move the DA to seek death in cases that caught the attention of the media.

Sociologists have asserted that many American citizens live in a “culture of fear,” as they are constantly assaulted with compelling news reports that hinder the audience’s capacity for critical thinking. Reporters intentionally focus on the most graphic, bizarre aspects of a case in order to garner the largest number of readers possible and spark feelings of anger and fear that often prevent individuals from using logic to assess the situation. David Garland has further stated that crime has become “the seemingly perennial fear of the late modern Western world,” and a “prominent cultural theme (p. 725).” As fear of violent victimization is nurtured by media sensationalism, it creates heightened levels of anxiety in those unfortunate enough to consume it. These anxieties serve to keep readers and viewers tuned in until their worries are put to rest, most likely through law enforcement efforts. This media sensationalism is especially relevant to the crime of serial murder, as extreme levels of fear and anxiety in the general public drive up support for capital punishment and generate belief in the “necessity” of retributive justice. Despite the requirement that jurors must consider societal factors and the background of the defendant in death penalty trials, media fear-mongering, misinformation, and representations of killers as



“evil monsters” pose a serious threat to the validity of capital trial outcomes (Haney, 2009).

### Research Questions

Q1: To what extent is serial murder portrayed by popular media in a way that may influence public opinion about:

- A) serial killers
- B) their motivations; and/or
- C) capital punishment/death of the killer

Q2: To what extent is loaded terminology/sensationalism used in popular media reports about serial killers, and, if so, to what extent is it used?

Q3: How often are academic theories of causation focused on by popular media in reports on serial killers?

Q4: To what extent are serial killers with different motives portrayed dissimilarly by popular media?

Q5: How often is support for capital punishment/death of the killer present in popular media reports on serial killers?

### III. Method

This study involves a content analysis of online journal articles, blog posts, and other forms of news media that report on various serial killers. It examines how these reports frame each killer as well as the presence of sensationalist terminology and academic theories of causation along with references to and support for capital punishment. For the current study, serial killer was defined as anyone suspected of at least three separate murders, whether or not convicted, who was often referred to by popular media as a serial killer. The concept of a cooling-off period was not used here, in line with the FBI's 2005 serial murder symposium, as the one-month time frame creates arbitrary distinctions between serial and spree killers. Consequently, Richard Chase and Herbert Mullin, whose murders occurred close enough together to classify them as spree killers based on the FBI definition, are considered to be serial killers for the purposes of this research.

#### Sample

The samples for both serial killers and news reports used in this study were selected with a purposive sampling procedure. First, one dozen killers were selected from a pool of all known American male serial killers. Killers were chosen based on three major attributes: time period active, applicable archetypes, and sentence received. The sample was selected specifically to include killers from each decade since the 1970s. Individuals were selected so the full sample would include killers who fit each of the four archetypes presented by Holmes and Holmes (2009) to ensure a

variety of motivations and theories of causation would be present within the sample. Finally, it should be noted that selected killers received a variety of sentences, only some of which included death. Table A shows a summary of the active decades and applicable archetypes for each killer in this analysis.

Next, a sample of ten online media reports was selected for each killer based on a variety of specific Google searches. Search terms included each killer’s name followed by terms such as “serial killer,” “motive,” “trial,” “family,” or “victims.” For each search, only the first three pages of Google results were examined. This was done to ensure that reports included in the sample were items that are likely to be viewed by the general public. Informational webpages compiled by multiple authors such as Wikipedia and Murderpedia were excluded, but all other results were considered for analysis. Once opened, reports that offered only a few sentences of generic coverage were excluded and replaced. Any repeated reports from prior searches were also replaced until ten unique items were obtained for each killer. Most reports included in this analysis were obtained from major news outlets such as CNN, ABC, New York Times, while a few came from online outlets such as ThoughtCo. and Ranker.

**Table A. Serial Killer Archetypes**

	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Hedonistic	Dahmer, Little	Dahmer, Little, Sells	Dahmer, Little, Sells	Little, Sowell	
Mission		Hansen			Falls
Power/Control	DeAngelo, Rader	DeAngelo, Rader, Ridgway	Rader, Ridgway	Keyes	Keyes
Visionary	Chase, Mullin				

## Coding

The goal of this study was to analyze the selected serial killer media reports and identify the occurrence of specific factors that may influence public opinion of said killers, their motivations, and capital punishment. To accomplish this, six content areas were selected for analysis: loaded terminology, positive references to personal character, negative references to personal character, theories of causation, references to capital punishment, and support for capital punishment.

**Loaded Terminology/Sensationalism.** This category includes any use of sensationalist language intended to evoke an emotional response with words such as “monster,” “demon,” “slaying,” “horror,” “terror,” “gruesome,” and “grotesque.” The word torture was specifically excluded due to its existence in Dennis Rader’s BTK moniker and overall lack of appearance in articles covering other killers.

**Positive Characteristics of the Killer.** This category includes any references to the killer as a “normal” person, upstanding citizen, loving husband or father, church member, business owner, or otherwise respected member of the community. Mentions of favorable activity in school, employment, and the military are also included here.

**Negative Characteristics of the Killer.** Personal references that portray the killer in an undesirable manner are included in this category. Examples include: rapist, shoplifter, loner, drifter, arsonist, mentally disturbed, cannibal, failed marriages, bursts of violent rage, deviant youth. Dishonorable military discharge and being fired from a job are included here as well.

**Theories of Causation.** This category includes any explicit references as to why a killer may have committed his crimes. These reasons most often relate to childhood trauma, mental illness, thrill seeking, or repressed anger. Reported statements made by the killers themselves, court psychologists, and killers' family members are all included here.

**References to Capital Punishment.** Any explicit reference to capital punishment, despite whether it was applicable to a specific killer, is included in this category. Statements that mention a killer receiving LWOP due to a lack of capital punishment within a given state are included here along with any mentions of actual execution sentences.

**Support for Capital Punishment/Death of Killer.** This category includes any statements that favor the execution of a killer, be they from victims' families, prosecutors and other court officials, the killer himself, or anyone else quoted in the article. For one article, references to Jeffrey Dahmer's murder in prison are also included here, as it is portrayed as an act of "vigilante justice" doled out by a fellow inmate who guards intentionally allowed alone with Dahmer. Support for Neal Falls' death at the hands of his intended victim was also included here.

#### IV. Results

Dennis Rader, also known as Bind-Torture-Kill (BTK), a name he coined for himself, murdered 10 victims between 1974 and 1991. Most of his victims were adult females, aged 21 to 59, for whom Rader harbored violent sexual desires, a fixation he had developed in childhood; however, he also killed two children in his first set of murders, along with their mother and father. In another case, a female victim's brother was shot, but he did not die. Children at further crime scenes were all left unharmed (Minutaglio, 2018). Although he did not rape any of his victims, the disturbing sexual nature of Rader's crimes was evident in the crude breast-shaped B he designed for his BTK signature and used in letters sent to the police throughout the span of his crimes. This aspect of the BTK case was kept from the public until Rader's arrest to ensure further communications from BTK were not an imposter (Sylvester, 2005).

While Rader had no specific method of killing his victims, he preferred to strangle or suffocate them in various ways, after which he would take photos of the body and sometimes personal belongings of the victim. These "trophies" would eventually lead to his demise, as BTK's arrogance and need for attention years after fading from the spotlight prompted him to contact police with cold case evidence more than a decade after his last kill. In 2005, after falsely assuring BTK a floppy disk filled with data would be untraceable, police successfully linked a mailed disk back to BTK's church (Hansen, 2006). Rader was arrested soon afterward and confessed to each of the 10 murders at his arraignment in June later that year. He was sentenced to

10 consecutive life terms; prosecution could not seek the death penalty as Kansas did not have it on the books when Rader committed his crimes (Nolasco, 2018).

As displayed in Table 1, Rader's positive qualities, such as his role as a father, husband, and church president, were often covered by the media alongside his murders. Rader was a perfect representation of the stereotypical white male killer who lived a double life and fooled even his own family into suspecting nothing of his crimes. Many articles focused on this fact to varying degrees, inciting fear around the possibility of being unknowingly "Married to a Monster," as one article on Rader's wife was entitled (Johnson, 2005). Rader's own desire for fame and willingness to talk with police provided ample information for journalists to report to the public in regard to his personal life, and interest in the killer has recently been rekindled with the publication of his daughter's book, in which she discusses her life being raised by a serial killer (Dooley, 2019). Although ineligible for execution, capital punishment was mentioned in almost half the articles, and one article that specifically covered Rader's sentencing offered support for his death from both victim's family members and the prosecution.

**Table 1. Dennis Rader**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
<b>Article 1</b>	4	2	1	2	1	0
<b>Article 2</b>	2	5	1	3	0	0
<b>Article 3</b>	2	6	1	0	0	0
<b>Article 4</b>	2	5	5	0	1	3
<b>Article 5</b>	4	3	8	0	0	0
<b>Article 6</b>	5	4	3	0	1	1
<b>Article 7</b>	3	10	1	3	0	0
<b>Article 8</b>	5	6	1	0	0	0
<b>Article 9</b>	1	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Article 10</b>	1	6	4	2	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<i>29</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>

Jeffrey Dahmer, the Milwaukee Cannibal, murdered 17 men and boys between the years of 1978 and 1991, claiming his last victim just days before his capture in late July at the age of 31. He would kill, dismember, and later consume young men after luring them into his home with promises of booze, movies, and sex. Once they were inside, however, Dahmer's demeanor would change. He would become violent, unwilling to allow his captive to leave. Eventually, he would kill his hostage. Some he drugged and then strangled; others had acid poured into holes drilled in their skulls (Kates, 1994). He dismembered the bodies in various ways throughout the years, and neighbors often complained of a putrid smell emanating from his residence. When he was finally caught, multiple human heads and other body parts were found stored in various containers and refrigeration units in his rancid apartment, including a pair of hands and male genitals decomposing in a lobster pot and a 57-gallon drum of body parts in the corner of his bedroom (McFarland, 1991).



Dahmer targeted young men due to his attraction to them, as a gay man, although he felt great shame about his sexuality. Unable to cope with feelings of isolation and loneliness he had felt since childhood, Dahmer explained his own compulsion to kill and consume his victims not as an act of hate, but rather performed out of a desire to keep part of those men with him. Discussions with doctors following his arrest led Dahmer to seek an insanity defense, as he claimed he was unable to control his urges to have sex with and cannibalize the dead (Barron & Tabor, 1991). The jury, however, was not swayed by Dahmer's plea, and he was sentenced to 15 life terms, as Wisconsin had already abolished its death penalty. Dahmer died in prison only two years later, his skull cracked by a fellow inmate with a metal rod (Schram, 2015).

As shown in Table 2, Dahmer received a great amount of media coverage over his negative characteristics. His lifelong fixation with bones and gore, which began with collecting dead animals in his youth, and his parents' toxic marriage and eventual divorce provided the perfect foundation for journalists looking to portray Dahmer as a cannibalistic monster who lacked the ability to form normal relationships (Kates, 1994). Positive character references were sparse and limited only to his time served in the army or spent working in a chocolate factory prior to his arrest. Dahmer's ineligibility for execution was mentioned a few times across articles, and so too was his own professed desire to be put to death, despite LWOP being the harshest sentence he could receive. One article, an interview with the man who killed Dahmer in prison, portrays the act as "vigilante justice," and the assailant claims he was only able to kill

Dahmer as prison officials wanted him dead and put them alone together on purpose (Schram, 2015).

**Table 2. Jeffrey Dahmer**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	6	1	3	0	2	3
Article 2	1	2	14	2	0	0
Article 3	4	0	3	0	1	0
Article 4	2	0	2	0	0	0
Article 5	4	0	2	0	0	2
Article 6	2	2	3	1	0	0
Article 7	5	0	3	0	0	0
Article 8	6	1	11	2	0	0
Article 9	2	1	4	0	0	0
Article 10	4	0	4	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>

Robert Hansen, also known as the Butcher Baker due to his alternate life as an upstanding baker and business owner, murdered at least 17 women and raped as many as 30 others throughout the 1970s in the wilds surrounding Anchorage, Alaska. He was a skilled huntsman who enjoyed stalking his victims for hours or even days after releasing them naked into the frigid Alaskan wilderness, killing them either with a rifle or hunting knife before burying them in shallow graves. He mainly targeted prostitutes and exotic dancers, as their population had exploded along with the booming construction of the Trans-Alaska pipeline. Hansen knew the sudden disappearance of transient sex workers was unlikely to raise suspicion, and when it did, his reputation as a respectable business owner and family man always won out over any prostitute's story (Usborne, 2014). Hansen's desire to demean and destroy women, specifically those he considered "bad" due to their promiscuous nature, likely stemmed from difficulties he experienced socializing throughout his early life, as girls

were often put off by Hansen’s teen acne scars and stutter. He was described as possessing an “infantile personality” with volatile emotions and clingy fixations by a court psychologist during his first stint in prison for burning down his hometown’s school bus garage at the age of 20 (Krajicek, 2019).

While his façade held for over a decade, allowing him to fly dozens of women alone into the wilderness with his personal bush plane, he was eventually done in by this method. His final intended victim, 17-year-old Cindy Paulson, managed to escape, still handcuffed, while Hansen loaded his plane with his back turned (Usborne, 2014). She fled to a nearby motel and informed police of Hansen’s intentions. Months passed without legal action, but the discovery of multiple bodies in the area Hansen had planned to fly Paulson provided enough evidence for police to secure a warrant to search Hansen’s property. Once inside, they discovered jewelry trophies taken from various victims and a map marking over a dozen gravesites around the Knick River. Hansen eventually confessed to 17 murders and led police to multiple bodies, although there were further spots marked on his map that he denied burying victims at, and some bodies remain undiscovered today (Grey, 2019). Hansen was tried for only 4 of the known murders, to avoid the legal trouble of 17 court appearances. He was sentenced to 461 years plus life without the possibility of parole. He died of natural causes in 2014 while at an Anchorage hospital after being transferred from a local prison (Andrews, 2014).

As illustrated in Table 3, Hansen received a mix of coverage highlighting both his positive and negative qualities. As a seemingly “normal” family man and business

owner, Hansen offered the same stereotypical killer image as BTK, who had yet to be identified when Hansen was caught; however, he quickly faded from infamy shortly after his conviction as Hansen expressed no interest in interacting with the media (Lawson, 2018). In further contrast to Rader, the supposed cause for Hansen's crimes, when mentioned at all, was always due to his hatred for prostitutes, rather than a desire for fame and power. Many recent articles published on Hansen were prompted by his death in 2014, after having lived for decades in an Alaskan prison (Andrews, 2019). Despite the nature of his crimes, capital punishment was mentioned in only one article, which stated Alaska had no active death penalty alongside Hansen's 461-year sentence.

**Table 3. Robert Hansen**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
<b>Article 1</b>	4	4	7	0	0	0
<b>Article 2</b>	1	5	2	1	0	0
<b>Article 3</b>	3	3	3	0	0	0
<b>Article 4</b>	3	7	10	0	0	0
<b>Article 5</b>	1	5	10	0	0	0
<b>Article 6</b>	3	4	7	1	1	0
<b>Article 7</b>	3	2	2	0	0	0
<b>Article 8</b>	3	4	1	0	0	0
<b>Article 9</b>	2	6	10	1	0	0
<b>Article 10</b>	4	2	6	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	27	42	59	4	1	0

Tommy Lynn Sells, sometimes referred to as the Coast to Coast Killer, lived most of his adult life as a drifter, committing various crimes, including murder, across the United States throughout the 1980s and 90s. While his actual body count is unknown, he confessed to over 70 murders, but he later admitted to fabricating murder stories in hopes of getting a life sentence instead of death just as a previous

drifter convicted in Texas, Henry Lee Lucas, had succeeded in years before (Maccormack, 2000). His known murders were mostly random, often motivated by rage and many times accompanied by drug and alcohol use, although he often targeted petite women he found sexually appealing. The most gruesome crime he has been linked to involved the bludgeoning of a pregnant St. Louis woman and her two children, one of which she gave birth to during the attack, in 1987. Her husband was found shot three times in the head in a nearby field with his penis severed (Gauen, 2014).

Sells was soon linked to the molestations and murders of multiple young girls across the USA after his Texas capture in January 2000, when he was arrested for the slaying of 13-year-old Katie Harris in the early morning of December 31, 1999. Sells thought he had killed Harris' 10-year-old friend too, slicing both girls' throats with a hunting knife; however, Krystal survived, played dead, and then fled to a nearby house, where she was able to obtain help and alert authorities. It was her work with a police sketch artist days later that would lead to the capture of Tommy Sells, a family acquaintance who attended the same church as the Harrises. Her emotional testimony in the trial later that year all but sealed Sells' fate, and the jury deliberated for only a few hours before returning a death sentence (Kohn, 2001). Sells spent nearly 14 years on Texas death row, where he admitted killing was like a drug for him, a high he was always chasing, and that strangulation was his favorite method to use because he enjoyed watching the life fade from his victim's eyes. He was secretive about his childhood, but eventually admitted to being molested between the ages of 8 to 14 by a

neighborhood man (Fanning, 2014). He also suffered a severe fever at 18 months due to meningitis, which killed his twin sister Tammy and may have left Sells with permanent brain damage. He was executed April 3, 2014 by lethal injection (Joseph, 2014).

As displayed in Table 4, Sells received a significant amount of media coverage regarding capital punishment. This outcome is unsurprising, as many articles were published after his sentencing or execution thirteen years later; however, it is interesting how the media chose to focus almost exclusively on Sells' negative qualities and support for his death, despite mitigating factors from his childhood, meningitis and molestation, which likely left his brain and psyche damaged (Maccormack, 2000). Further, multiple articles discussed Sells' failed appeals to have his death sentence halted if Texas remained unwilling to disclose the name of the pharmacy it secured its execution drugs from (Sherwood & Efron, 2014). Overall, Sells was portrayed in a similar light to Dahmer, as a savage killer with few redeeming qualities, while the "family men" Rader and Hansen enjoyed discussion of their positive qualities by the media and much less reference to execution.

**Table 4. Tommy Lynn Sells**

	<b>Loaded Terminology</b>	<b>Positive Character Traits</b>	<b>Negative Character Traits</b>	<b>Theories of Causation</b>	<b>References to Capital Punishment</b>	<b>Support for Capital Punishment</b>
<b>Article 1</b>	5	0	4	2	1	0
<b>Article 2</b>	6	0	5	3	2	0
<b>Article 3</b>	3	0	3	0	1	1
<b>Article 4</b>	1	0	2	0	2	5
<b>Article 5</b>	1	0	1	0	1	0
<b>Article 6</b>	5	4	14	2	1	3
<b>Article 7</b>	0	0	2	0	1	2
<b>Article 8</b>	0	0	13	0	1	0
<b>Article 9</b>	1	0	0	0	2	0
<b>Article 10</b>	0	1	0	0	2	2
<b>Total</b>	22	5	44	7	14	13

Neal Falls differs from most other killers on this list as he is only a suspected serial killer. Falls has only one known victim, an escort who survived his attempt on her life and instead killed Falls with his own gun in July 2015; however, authorities found a “kill kit” in Falls’ car, which included multiple pairs of handcuffs, axes, knives, a shovel, a plastic tote large enough for a body, and a list with the names, phone numbers, and ages of multiple other women in the area and one in San Diego. He was also living out of his car at the time of the attack that led to his death and had traveled across the United States, residing in various states throughout his life (Lohr, 2015). Further investigation revealed Falls had been in contact with police in 20 states, although never for anything more serious than traffic violations. All these factors taken together prompted police in multiple states to launch investigations into Falls in relation to dead or missing women from their areas (Eaton, 2015).

While Falls’ death before his capture ensured he would be unable to confess to any prior murders, police and amateur investigators believe Falls is likely the man behind the disappearances and deaths of four young escorts from Las Vegas in the

mid-2000s (Buchanan, 2015). Falls lived just outside Las Vegas from 2000 to 2008, renting a room from a woman with a young daughter who described him as the “creepy uncle” type (McNamara, 2015). During this time, he worked as a security guard for the Hoover Dam. His old coworkers were not surprised to hear the news of Falls death and suspected murder involvement, stating in Facebook comments he was psychopathic, contemptuous toward women, and would often drive through the Arizona checkpoint hours before his shift, disappearing into the desert, a place where coworkers would joke he was probably hiding bodies (“A glimpse into the life,” 2015).

As shown in Table 5, Falls received a great deal of media coverage highlighting his negative qualities with few references to any positives; however, there were also very few instances of loaded terminology throughout those same articles. Falls’ lack of close friends, family, or a permanent residence during the years prior to his death explains why the media had to focus so much on his negative traits. Only one article mentioned statements from someone who claimed to be a longtime friend of Falls, and that anonymous informant offered little more information than Falls being a “normal” calm man whom he never imagined could be a serial killer (Briquelet, 2015). The lack of loaded terminology, in contrast to previous killers in this analysis, may be due to Falls’ lack of any confirmed murders and the fact he received little coverage after his initial attack, soon fading into obscurity. In addition, while capital punishment was not applicable to this situation, support for Falls’ death as it occurred was mentioned a few times across articles.



**Table 5. Neal Falls**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	1	0	5	0	0	0
Article 2	1	1	17	0	0	1
Article 3	0	1	6	0	0	0
Article 4	0	0	4	0	0	0
Article 5	0	1	5	0	0	1
Article 6	0	0	6	0	0	1
Article 7	0	2	3	0	0	0
Article 8	0	0	6	1	0	0
Article 9	0	5	8	0	0	0
Article 10	0	1	7	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>

Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, murdered at least 49 women from around the Seattle area throughout the 1980s and 90s, although he has claimed upwards of 80 victims in recent years (Dolak, 2013). He killed prostitutes, teen runaways, and other women from the streets who were easy to find alone and lure into his truck. Ridgway himself stated that he murdered these women specifically because he hated prostitutes and thought he could kill as many as he wanted without getting caught, as the women would likely not be reported missing right away, if at all (Tuchman, 2003). His usual kill method was simple and quick: He would pick up a woman from the street in his truck, sometimes take her back to his house, and strangle her to death during sex. Once she was dead, Ridgway would dispose of his victim's corpse in the wilderness surrounding the Green River, the location where the first bodies were discovered. Ridgway dumped the bodies in "clusters" so as to easily remember their locations and would return to recent sites to continue having sex with the corpses as they decomposed (Shenfeld, 2018).

Although Ridgway first became a suspect in the Green River killings in 1983 after a witness reported seeing a recently discovered victim getting into his truck before she disappeared, he managed to evade discovery by cooperating with police on multiple occasions, even passing a polygraph test at one point. The beginning of the end, however, came for Ridgway in 1987, after he provided authorities with a saliva sample. Thanks to advancements in DNA analysis, Ridgway was finally linked to a few of his victims in 2001, leading to his prompt arrest (Harden, 2003). While the prosecution originally sought the death penalty, Ridgway was offered a plea deal of life without parole in exchange for leading investigators to the remains of the dozens of women he killed who remained missing. Ridgway took the deal, and was sentenced to 48 life terms in 2003, one for each victim (Tizon, 2003). A 49<sup>th</sup> life sentence was added in 2011 for an additional woman who was discovered the year before, but authorities believe there are more victims from outside the King County jurisdiction to which Ridgway will likely not confess due to the risk of capital punishment (Nolasco, 2018).

As illustrated in Table 6, Ridgway received significant media coverage over both his positive and negative qualities, as well as multiple references to capital punishment across articles. Loaded terminology was also plentiful. Although most of Ridgway's murders took place within a few years, and he lived a "normal" life attending church and working as a truck painter afterward, similarly to Dennis Rader, the two were portrayed very differently by the media. Rader received much more focus on his positive qualities in comparison to his negatives, while Ridgway received an equal mix. Ridgway himself, however, professed to a psychologist he considered himself only a

“three out of five” on a scale of “evil” because he did not torture any of his victims and killed them quickly (Harden, 2003). While Ridgway was ineligible for execution after taking the plea deal that spared his life, support for his death was plentiful, and the prosecution had at first denied it would ever offer him a life-saving plea (Kershaw, 2003). Ridgway’s operation in a state with an active death penalty during the span of his crimes may explain why he was portrayed more negatively than Rader, who was ineligible from execution from the start.

**Table 6. Gary Ridgway**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	2	1	0	0	3	1
Article 2	2	3	3	0	1	0
Article 3	2	1	0	1	2	1
Article 4	3	2	0	2	2	1
Article 5	11	4	2	0	1	4
Article 6	1	1	3	1	1	3
Article 7	4	7	0	1	1	0
Article 8	4	1	0	0	2	0
Article 9	0	3	9	3	0	0
Article 10	4	7	11	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>

Herbert Mullin was a psychotic serial killer active around the Santa Cruz, California area for four months between October 1972 and February 1973. His psychosis manifested in the form of disembodied voices that commanded Mullin to kill in order to prevent a massive earthquake from destroying California. Human sacrifice, he believed, was needed to prevent another disaster from occurring along the San Andreas Fault, and the Vietnam War coming to a close meant fewer human deaths and a greater chance of quakes (Dowd, 2018). Mullin’s victims were mostly chosen at random: a homeless man, a college woman hitchhiking to an interview, a priest he was

confessing to, four teenage boys camping in the woods, but he also killed an old friend and his wife after Mullin decided the man was to blame for the marijuana use he believed partly caused his psychosis. During his spree, Mullin killed 13 people in total, including two children (“Youth charged in 11 killings,” 1973).

While Mullin had what most would consider a “normal” childhood and was even voted “most likely to succeed” in high school, his life quickly disintegrated after graduation when his friend was killed in a car crash. Not long after, he began experimenting with marijuana and LSD as well as hearing disembodied voices. Over the next few years, he spent time in and out of mental institutions and was diagnosed multiple times with paranoid schizophrenia (“Serial killer Herbert Mullin,” 2017). Despite his history and the attempts of his defense team to secure an insanity plea, Mullin was found sane by a jury and sentenced to life in the California prison system, where he has been denied parole multiple times. He will be eligible for another hearing in 2021, at which point he will be well into his 70s (Kelly, 2011).

As noted in Table 7, Mullin received a significant amount of media coverage over his negative traits, but unlike previous killers in this analysis, the psychological reasons for his crimes also received heavy coverage. This outcome is unsurprising, however, as Mullin was a paranoid schizophrenic who claimed to be commanded by voices to stop an earthquake with his random murders, a far cry from stereotypical serial killer motivation (Calhoun, 2016). A few instances of loaded terminology and positive character traits also appeared across most articles, but references to capital punishment were non-existent. This lack may be explained by the fact Mullin’s

murders took place during the nation-wide execution moratorium following *Furman v. Georgia* in 1972, making him ineligible for death regardless of his crimes.

**Table 7. Herbert Mullin**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	0	2	5	6	0	0
Article 2	2	1	3	3	0	0
Article 3	5	2	7	1	0	0
Article 4	0	1	3	0	0	0
Article 5	3	2	8	2	0	0
Article 6	1	3	1	2	0	0
Article 7	3	3	5	1	0	0
Article 8	3	0	1	1	0	0
Article 9	1	3	6	2	0	0
Article 10	0	2	7	3	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Richard Chase is often called the “Vampire” of Sacramento due to his insatiable obsession with blood, both animal and human, which eventually led him to murder six people in early 1978. His first human victim was the result of a random drive by shooting just days before New Year’s, due to Chase’s frustration with his mother not allowing him home for Christmas (Bovsun, 2010). The two attacks to follow, however, were much more disturbing. Chase chose his victims by checking for doors that were unlocked, believing that locked doors were a sign he was unwelcome (Montaldo, 2019). Using this method, Chase murdered Teresa Wallin with the same gun he used in the drive by, mutilated her body, raped her corpse, drank her blood, and left her lying disemboweled on the bedroom floor with dog feces in her mouth. He perpetrated a similar crime only days later, killing and raping a woman after murdering a visiting male friend, the woman’s six-year-old, and the 22-month-old she was babysitting. The toddler was found months later in a box at a nearby church, decapitated and partially

mummified (“Richard Trenton Chase,” 2012). Not long after this crime, Chase was captured by police due mostly to his own negligence. His apartment was covered in blood, and a container of human brain matter discovered inside ensured authorities they had the man they were searching for (Nicholas, 2019).

Chase’s trial centered on his sanity, as guilt was obvious. Prior to his murder spree, he had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic and spent time in a mental ward after injecting rabbit’s blood into his own veins and contracting blood poisoning. While hospitalized, Chase killed birds from outside his window and drank their blood, earning him the nickname Dracula among hospital staff. After his release, he remained on medication under the conservatorship of his parents: they soon paid for Chase an apartment, leaving him unsupervised. His mother eventually decided to wean him from his medication, and in 1977 his parents failed to renew their conservatorship. That August, just months before his first murder, police found Chase in the Nevada wilderness naked and covered in blood with a cow’s liver in a bucket in his truck (“Richard Trenton Chase,” 2012). Chase himself claimed Nazi UFOs were commanding him to kill, lest his blood be turned to powder, an omen he could foretell based on the scum present on the bottom of his bathroom soap dish (Nicholas, 2018). Despite the defense’s efforts, Chase was found sane and sentenced to death in the California gas chambers. He would never see execution, however, as he killed himself in 1980 by an overdose of daily medications he had saved up over time (Montaldo, 2019).

As displayed in Table 8, Chase received an extreme amount of media coverage regarding his negative qualities as well as a significant amount of loaded terminology,

with almost no positive character references and few explanations of the reasons for his crimes. This outcome is interesting, as Chase exhibited the same paranoid-schizophrenic psychosis as Mullin, believing Nazi UFOs were commanding him to kill in order to preserve his own blood (Nicholas, 2018). Unlike Mullin, however, Chase was eligible for capital punishment following the end of the nation-wide execution moratorium in 1976 with the ruling in *Gregg v. Georgia*. His sentence to die in the California gas chamber explains why references to capital punishment appeared in almost all articles about Chase, but it may also explain why he was portrayed in a much more negative light than Mullin.

**Table 8. Richard Chase**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	2	0	3	0	0	0
Article 2	18	0	25	2	1	0
Article 3	2	0	12	0	1	1
Article 4	3	0	19	0	1	1
Article 5	3	0	9	1	1	0
Article 6	3	0	15	1	1	0
Article 7	4	1	22	0	1	1
Article 8	1	0	15	1	1	0
Article 9	2	0	2	1	1	0
Article 10	3	1	24	1	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>

Samuel Little is currently believed to be one of the most prolific American serial killers, claiming to have killed more than 90 women from 1970 to 2005. Police have confirmed his link to over 30 cases and are working to continue finding and identifying his other victims (Glenza, 2018). Little targeted marginalized women, prostitutes and drug addicts from the “ghettos,” the killer himself confessed. Once alone with his

victim, Little would often use his strength as a former boxer to knock the woman out before strangling her while he masturbated. Because he left no visible wounds on his victims, their deaths were often attributed to accidents, overdose, or exposure, if their bodies were recovered at all (Fieldstadt, 2018). Decades after their murders, Little's memory of his victims has remained sharp, and he has drawn 16 of their portraits while in prison. He now claims he lives in his mind with his "babies," and that he loved all the women he killed (Lauren, 2018).

Although Little was arrested more than 100 times across his lifetime, many times for violent offenses, he had served less than 10 years total behind bars when he was arrested at a Kentucky homeless shelter in 2012. He was returned to California on drug charges and soon convicted in the killings of three women from Los Angeles in the 1980s, thanks to advancements in DNA technology. While he staunchly maintained his innocence throughout the trial, he later began confessing to the crimes of his past, including two murders he was found innocent of in the 80s (Zraick, 2019). He was moved to Texas for his confession to the 1994 murder of Denise Brothers, but prosecution agreed not to seek the death penalty in exchange for Little's continued cooperation with investigators. Now in his late seventies and wheelchair-bound, Little is in declining health, and officials expect him to soon die in the Texas prison (Wilber, 2018).

As illustrated in Table 9, Little received significant media coverage highlighting his negative traits, but no further categories of analysis received much attention across articles. Little, however, is a recent case, having only begun confessing to his massive



body count in 2018, after his conviction for three murders a few years prior. Currently, he has only a handful of confirmed kills, none of which were gruesome, with many even ruled as accidents rather than homicides at the time the bodies were discovered (“Samuel Little: US serial killer,” 2018). This reality has likely given the media little to sensationalize with loaded terminology. Lack of reference to capital punishment is also unsurprising, as trials and convictions for Little’s newly confessed kills have not had time to culminate. The only reference made to capital punishment mentioned he was spared by Texas prosecution in exchange for his continued cooperation (Wilber, 2018).

**Table 9. Samuel Little**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
<b>Article 1</b>	0	0	5	0	0	0
<b>Article 2</b>	0	0	11	0	0	0
<b>Article 3</b>	0	1	4	0	0	0
<b>Article 4</b>	2	1	12	0	0	0
<b>Article 5</b>	0	2	1	1	0	0
<b>Article 6</b>	0	2	1	0	0	0
<b>Article 7</b>	0	3	24	0	0	1
<b>Article 8</b>	3	1	5	0	0	0
<b>Article 9</b>	2	0	4	0	0	0
<b>Article 10</b>	2	4	14	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	9	14	81	1	1	1

Joseph DeAngelo, known in the past as the East Area Rapist, Original Night Stalker, and today as the Golden State Killer, murdered a dozen people and raped upwards of 50 women in various parts of California throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many of DeAngelo’s crimes occurred during his stint as a police officer, at which time he used his prior training experience to aid him in breaking into more than 100 homes around Visalia and Sacramento (Selk, 2018). Breaking and entering soon escalated to binding and raping women while forcing their husbands lay with dishes on

their backs, threatening to kill the couple if he heard the man try to free himself. After he was fired from the force for shoplifting, DeAngelo's objective morphed, and he began killing his victims in a new area of California. After the birth of his first daughter in 1981, DeAngelo refrained from violent crime for five years, claiming his final rape and murder victim in 1986 (Serna, Winton, & Parvini, 2018).

DeAngelo remained free for decades and was only captured in 2018 thanks to DNA links made through a public database (Molteni, 2018). Although neighbors reported he had a toxic relationship with his estranged wife and was prone to outbursts of cursing rage, much of his family was shocked by the news (Serna, 2018). Children of his late sister have since revealed that DeAngelo witnessed his younger sister raped by two airmen on an American airbase in Germany when he was around 10 years old, and DeAngelo's parents told the children to never speak of the event to anyone (Lapin, 2018). While some believe this event to be the catalyst of DeAngelo's future crimes, others attribute cause to DeAngelo's breakup with his first fiancée Bonnie, whose name he reportedly cried out in hatred after raping one of his victims (Sulek, 2018).

As displayed in Table 10, DeAngelo received significant media coverage in reference to his positive and negative personal traits, and a moderate amount of loaded terminology appeared across articles. His results are quite similar to Robert Hansen's, another family man with a steady job who secretly raped and killed multiple women; however, although he was captured only in 2018, the media has already begun to mention possible reasons for DeAngelo's crimes, but this is due mostly to the

cooperation of his late sister’s children (Lapin, 2018). References to capital punishment were almost non-existent, but this is unsurprising as a trial and conviction have not yet had time to culminate. Only one article mentioned the fact prosecution has not yet decided whether to seek the death penalty.

**Table 10. Joseph DeAngelo**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	4	1	4	4	0	0
Article 2	2	10	7	0	0	0
Article 3	5	19	17	0	0	0
Article 4	4	0	5	0	0	0
Article 5	0	0	4	0	0	0
Article 6	5	4	9	2	0	0
Article 7	0	5	7	0	1	0
Article 8	2	12	6	0	0	0
Article 9	4	14	10	0	0	0
Article 10	2	0	1	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

Israel Keyes has only three known victims, although he claimed to have killed “less than a dozen” people around the country over the course of a decade. While his first confessed victim was a still-unknown teen girl he raped and released in the late 1990s, investigators believe he committed his first murder sometime after his return from the Army in 2001 (Boots, 2018). In 2007, Keyes moved from Washington to Alaska with his daughter and new girlfriend, where he opened his own construction business and remained unknown to police until he deviated from his usual kill method in February 2012 (Montaldo, 2019). For previous murders, he would travel far from home, flying to the lower 48 before renting a car and driving for hundreds more miles in search of suitable targets. He buried “kill kits” around the country, with tools and weapons needed to kill and dispose of bodies, and he would return years later to make

use of these items; however, the only crime linked to this method thus far involved the disappearance of a middle-aged Vermont couple in the Summer of 2011 (Peters, 2019). Keyes only confessed to this crime as details were found saved on his personal computer when he was arrested for his final crime. He was very secretive and worried about the impact news of his crimes would have on his young daughter if he confessed to any details (Cohen & D’Oro, 2013).

The crime which sealed his fate involved the abduction, rape, and murder of 18-year-old Samantha Koenig from her job at a coffee stand in Keyes own town. Weeks after kidnapping and killing the girl, he sent a ransom demand to her family, posing her preserved corpse with a newspaper, fooling even the FBI into believing she was alive. The family complied, and Keyes was soon arrested after being pulled over for speeding in Texas. His truck had been placed under surveillance when an identical model was recorded by security cameras withdrawing money from Samantha’s bank account at various ATMs (Cohen & D’Oro, 2013). Keyes had little interest in discussing his crimes with authorities and had requested the death penalty, claiming he had no “long-term interest of survival” in prison. He demonstrated his point by killing himself in his cell that December, taking all the secrets of his crimes to the grave (Ng, 2013).

As shown in Table 11, Keyes received a significant amount of media coverage regarding both his positive and negative qualities, although the negatives appeared twice as often. This result is unsurprising, given Keyes’ life as a respected contractor with a live-in girlfriend and daughter in contrast with his crimes and the nature of his communication with police after his capture. As Keyes agreed only to cooperate if he

was kept away from the media, in an attempt to shield his daughter, many articles were published after his suicide in prison. The dark imagery he left behind in his suicide note-poem may have prompted the media to focus even more on Keyes' negative qualities (Ng, 2013). Further, Keyes' suicide after only a few months behind bars explains the lack of reference to capital punishment throughout articles.

**Table 11. Israel Keyes**

	Loaded Terminology	Positive Character Traits	Negative Character Traits	Theories of Causation	References to Capital Punishment	Support for Capital Punishment
Article 1	0	11	22	1	1	0
Article 2	8	13	16	1	0	0
Article 3	1	0	11	0	0	0
Article 4	0	0	6	1	1	1
Article 5	2	2	6	2	0	0
Article 6	0	2	8	0	1	0
Article 7	2	3	13	1	0	0
Article 8	0	9	0	0	0	0
Article 9	4	0	7	0	0	0
Article 10	5	10	12	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>

Anthony Sowell, the Cleveland Strangler, raped and murdered eleven women in his home from 2007 to 2009 and kept their decomposing bodies hidden on his property. He lived in a poverty-stricken community and lured women with histories of drugs and disappearances into his home with promises of alcohol. Once they were inside, however, he would turn violent, raping and then strangling the women with ligatures (Chen, 2010). Despite being a registered sex offender who had previously served fifteen years for raping a pregnant woman, police released Sowell from jail after rape allegations were brought against him by a woman who survived an attack in late 2008. This release allowed Sowell to continue raping and killing for another year

until his final capture, and families of victims killed after his first released have since won a \$1 million lawsuit against the city (Palmer, 2019).

Sowell allegedly grew up witnessing the beatings his mother and grandmother would subject his young nieces and nephews to, and by age eleven, he was regularly raping one of his nieces (Atassi, 2011). Hoping to avoid execution, Sowell offered an apology for his crimes at his sentencing, stating that his abusive childhood had left him unable to stand physical affection, and that he had begun hearing voices after suffering a heart attack in 2007 (“Convicted killer: ‘I’m sorry,’” 2019). His efforts to secure LWOP were in vain, and the Ohio jury returned a death sentence for each of his eleven murder convictions. Sowell is still on death row as of 2019, and an execution is likely years away as Ohio currently lacks lethal injection drugs (“Ohio court hears appeal,” 2016).

As depicted in Table 12, Sowell received significant media coverage highlighting his negative character traits with little in reference to positive qualities. His case was strikingly similar to Dahmer’s: a house filled with the putrid, decomposing corpses of his recent victims, all taken from the surrounding community (Guy, 2018); however, loaded terminology appeared only half as often in articles reporting on Sowell. In further contrast, references to capital punishment appeared more often in articles about Sowell, although this is unsurprising as Sowell was death penalty eligible while capital punishment was not an option for Dahmer. Interesting, however, is the lack of support for capital punishment across all articles about Sowell, despite the fact he was sentenced to death and is still on death row today.

**Table 12. Anthony Sowell**

	<b>Loaded Terminology</b>	<b>Positive Character Traits</b>	<b>Negative Character Traits</b>	<b>Theories of Causation</b>	<b>References to Capital Punishment</b>	<b>Support for Capital Punishment</b>
<b>Article 1</b>	4	2	5	0	0	0
<b>Article 2</b>	3	0	6	1	1	0
<b>Article 3</b>	0	2	5	0	1	0
<b>Article 4</b>	1	1	1	0	2	0
<b>Article 5</b>	0	2	5	0	1	0
<b>Article 6</b>	3	1	10	0	1	0
<b>Article 7</b>	0	0	3	0	1	0
<b>Article 8</b>	1	2	3	0	1	0
<b>Article 9</b>	2	0	3	0	1	0
<b>Article 10</b>	5	1	9	1	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<i>19</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>0</i>

## V. Discussion

Through content analysis of 120 varied online news reports, this study found that the popular news media often present serial killers in biased, sensationalized ways while paying minimal attention to possible scientific theories of causation and providing ample acceptance for the continuation of capital punishment. While only 80 total references to theories of causation occurred across all 120 analyzed articles, loaded terminology occurred a total of 286 times, and explicit support for a killer's death occurred 43 times. These findings are consistent with previous literature, as stated by Simpson (2017, p. 1): "Serial killers as they exist in the popular imagination are media constructs rooted in sociological/criminological/psychological realities." He further explains the serial killer is endlessly reinvented by the popular media for new audiences as a monster worthy of fear as different anxieties arise within a culture. These results are also consistent with Haney's (2009) claim that media criminology legitimates the idea that individuals are entirely responsible for their own behavior, which often garners support for the harshest punishment possible.

This combination of media sensationalism, lack of scientific reasoning, and acceptance of capital punishment is especially striking in the case of Richard Chase, a man who had previously served involuntary time in a psychiatric ward for his obvious mental disturbances, but who in the end was neglected by his parents and mental health professionals. Despite his mental state, he was sentenced to death shortly following the reinstatement of capital punishment in America, a fact which none of the analyzed articles mentioned. Of further interest is Chase's similarity to Herbert Mullin,



in both time frame and psychotic mental state; however, the two killers were portrayed quite differently from one another in the analyzed articles. Chase was often depicted as much more heinous and ravenous, as his nickname the “Vampire of Sacramento” suggests, despite claiming less victims than Mullin. It is possible that Chase’s execution sentence, in contrast to Mullin’s life sentence, influenced his portrayal by the media over time, as it is likely much easier to sensationalize and create fear around a person whom others previously condemned to death for their atrocities. Mullin, however, may have only been saved from death thanks to the four-year execution moratorium that followed *Furman v. Georgia* in 1972. Had his crimes occurred a few years later, in tandem with those of Chase, perhaps Mullin too would have been sentenced to death and sensationalized to the same extent as his counterpart.

The varied personal characteristics of killers had further influence on how they were sensationalized by the popular media. Those who fit the label of “family man” were often portrayed in positive ways alongside their crimes, such as constant mentions of Dennis Rader’s family and church service, while reclusive loners received much more focus on their negative traits. Again, it is possible these media representations had real effects on the fates of convicted killers. In the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, the *New York Times* ran either a full- or half-page article for 10 consecutive days following his arrest, some of which were included in this analysis (Bonn, 2017). His instant rise to infamy likely owed much of its success to the nature of Dahmer’s cannibalistic crimes, which were all too easy for the media to sensationalize. Like his

predecessor Ted Bundy, Dahmer was soon despised across America, by both free citizens and prisoners alike. While ineligible for execution, Dahmer's notoriety soon landed him alone with the wrong inmate, and his life was cut short by a metal pipe to the skull. Today, one can only speculate whether Dahmer's life in prison would have played out differently had he received less or different coverage from the popular media.

Dahmer is of further interest not only for the way his crimes were sensationalized by the media, but also for his similarity to Anthony Sowell, who received much less media attention. Both men were sexually motivated and lured their victims into their homes from the local community, violently killed them, then left their corpses to rot and permeate the surrounding area with the smell of death. Further, Sowell had a prison record of 15 years served for rape prior to his arrest for the murders, while Dahmer had been a seemingly law-abiding chocolate factory worker. Even still, Sowell was sentenced to death in Ohio and is currently still alive and attempting appeals from death row as of May 2019, while Dahmer received only a life sentence and has been dead for decades since his murder in prison. Despite these factors, Dahmer remains the far more sensationalized of the two killers, while Sowell has faded almost entirely from the media and memory of the general public. These results align with assertions made by Branson (2013) in his discussion on the lack of acknowledgment of black serial killers by the media despite their over-representation in prison. He further explains that blacks in the United States have been relegated to the ranks of low-level violent "street" criminals by the mainstream media and public,

and the now-commodified image of intelligent super-predator does not align with this discriminatory view that has been reinforced throughout the United States since the time of slavery.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The serial killers used in this study were selected via a purposive sampling procedure based on pre-identified traits, and all online articles were chosen using a convenience sampling technique online. The use of systematic random sampling could yield different results, especially if conducted on physical media sources as well such as printed newspapers or magazine covers. Further, small sample size was a limiting factor in this study, for both killers and articles. Future research should focus on the analysis of larger, random data samples and incorporate printed news sources when possible to establish more generalizable results. The online nature of this analysis was of specific limitation due to the difficulty in finding pre-2000 articles, as many old publications were never digitally archived. Future content analysis of physical sources that focuses on factors such as how much space on newspaper front pages and magazine covers was dedicated to serial killers could be of value, as these are sources many people are at least subconsciously exposed to during their everyday lives.

Another limitation of this study was the potential subjectivity of the one coder analyzing the data. It is certainly possible that performing the same analysis with multiple coders reviewing the material would yield different results. As such, future research should try to incorporate multiple coders whenever possible, especially when

analyzing larger volumes of data. Moreover, future coding should include expanded categories that further deconstruct the various themes present in popular serial killer media and their possible effects on the general public. For example, fear is not the only emotion generated by the media in relation to serial killers, as previous research shows serial murder has been not only sensationalized, but also glamorized by the popular media. This glamorization has led to the formation of a serial killer “fandom,” with countless members who idolize rather than demonize the media’s perfect monsters (Spychaj, 2017). Future research that takes this glamorization into account and contrasts it against negative sensationalism could be of significant value.

Comparison research in further areas could also be of value. While this study did not account for how sensationalism may vary across articles about the same killer over time, future studies on this topic could provide useful information, such as discovering whether capital punishment support increases significantly in media accounts shortly after the return of a death sentence. In addition, future research could examine the rare occurrences of capital punishment opposition across serial killer media to uncover which factors are most relevant to creating this viewpoint. Moreover, future research could compare articles from one publisher that discuss different killers and analyze how each killer was portrayed based on motivations and personal traits to discover if any significant differences exist between the various archetypes. Even still, future research could compare the sensationalism of serial killers to that of other highly publicized murderers, such as mass murderers or spouse/child killers.

Finally, future experimental research that examines the actual effects of serial killer media sensationalism on individuals could be of value, especially with regard to capital punishment. Participants could be split into three groups and exposed to serial killer reports that either offer support for capital punishment, avoid the topic entirely, or oppose execution. Individuals would take surveys that measure their support for capital punishment before and after reading the reports. These results could be of significant value for abolitionists. Further topics could be examined in this manner as well, such as how much influence media sensationalism has on the public's belief in rates of serial murder as well as which types of media are most likely to produce glamorization effects. Future research that examines neglected areas of serial murder, such as the existence of racial minorities and women as killers, would also be of significant value, as these groups remain even more undetected by authorities than the stereotypical white male killer.

### **Policy Implications and Conclusion**

The overall results of this analysis suggest the media is responsible for significant amounts of sensationalism surrounding serial murder and does little to disseminate scientific information about the phenomenon to the general public. Often, popular media chooses to focus on the personal traits of killers, such as past military service or relationships with family, rather than their psychological motivations for killing. Further, media accounts of convicted killers often offer support for the continued use of capital punishment. This information should be considered by policy

makers hoping to abolish the death penalty in the United States, as policy changes, public opinion, and media reporting work together in a cyclical process (Lee and Wong, 2019).

Because policy changes are unlikely to occur without public support, the popular media is in a unique position that abolitionists could use to work in their favor rather than against them. If the media were to focus on aspects of cases which refute capital punishment, such as Ridgway's life sentence in turn for his cooperation in recovering dozens more bodies, and purposely shy away from mentioning the possibility of execution, it could aid in decreasing public support for capital punishment over time. Further, the media could assist in educating the public about the reality of serial murder by incorporating simplified academic findings and source material that does more than sensationalize killers as inconceivable monsters deserving of death. The inclusion of scientific information that explains the motivations of killers and somewhat humanizes them without justifying their actions could also help to increase support for life confinement over that of execution; however, the media's vested interest in financial gain through any means necessary would be a difficult obstacle to overcome.

Policy makers should be concerned with accurate media portrayals of serial killers for more than just reasons of capital punishment abolition. As previously mentioned, black serial killers are often paid little attention by the media and public alike in comparison to their white counterparts (Branson, 2013). Mainstream stereotypes and the lack of attention afforded black serial killers pose a serious

hinderance to law enforcement and could allow black killers to operate undetected for decades. This very possibility is illustrated in the case of Samuel Little, another killer included in this analysis. Responsible for upwards of 90 murders that spanned four decades, Little lived as a drifter and escaped prison sentences for suspected murder twice before he was imprisoned for life after his 2012 arrest for new murder charges. Had Little been taken seriously as a possible serial killer decades ago, perhaps dozens of women would not have had their lives cut short by his hands.

The media, however, should remain wary, as it risks continuing to increase the number of self-proclaimed “serial killer fans” across the United States with its unnecessary glamorization of the phenomenon. Those with an interest in changing public policy should attempt to work with the media and promote the portrayal of serial killers in a more objective manner in public reports, which could then exist to help educate the public and further ongoing investigations, rather than simply sensationalize killers. While some killers, such as Israel Keyes, limit the media’s involvement out of fear for their own family’s wellbeing, others, such as Dennis Rader, revel in the attention of the public and are offered undeserved fame and a slight reprieve from the punishment of life confinement by sensationalist news stories. Policy makers should remain vigilant in limiting the media’s access to information on recently captured serial killers as well as interviews afforded to the convicted.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Serial Killer Media

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### Dennis Rader

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